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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

OPERATION ATTLEBORO--ITS SIGNIFICANCE

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE



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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
18 November 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Operation ATTLEBORO--Its Significance

Summary

The confrontation of allied and Communist forces which has shaped up in the fringes of War Zone "C" in South Vietnam could mark one of the most significant benchmarks in the war. Operation ATTLEBORO, although not yet completed, has already resulted in heavy losses both in personnel and vital supplies to the Viet Cong 9th Division--heretofore one of the most effective of the Communist units.

Of longer range significance, is the fact that, for the first time in the war, the major Communist political and military headquarters in the south (the Central Office for South Vietnam) is being threatened by ground forces. If the Communists are unable to defend this headquarters successfully and are forced even temporarily to move this command complex out of its base area, the overwhelming superiority of US military strength and the great effectiveness of US-conducted search-and-destroy operations will have been brought home more dramatically than ever before to the Communist leadership.

NOTE: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and with the Director's special assistant for Vietnamese affairs.

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1. Operation ATTLEBORO has chalked up several firsts since it began on 14 October. It has become the largest allied military action thus far in the war. It is also the first probe in strength into one of the most significant of all the Communist strongholds in South Vietnam, War Zone "C." This has been virtually uncontested Communist territory since the days of the Viet Minh struggle against the French.

2. What makes War Zone "C" of particular importance is the fact that it houses the political and military headquarters for all Communist operations in the south. This headquarters--known as the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)--is surrounded by a large complex of administrative and military facilities which are spread throughout War Zone "C." Included in this complex are major military training camps, communications facilities, medical installations, propaganda and educational facilities, the main headquarters and various subordinate office of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, and offices for all the other functions of the Communists' nation-wide, quasi-governmental apparatus.

3. Most of the heavy military action thus far in Operation ATTLEBORO has taken place in the region of Base Area 55--an extensive area some 10-20 miles east-northeast of Tay Ninh city. [REDACTED]

X1 [REDACTED] reveal that this base area serves the Viet Cong 9th Light Infantry Division. Prisoners taken in Operation ATTLEBORO have disclosed that the three regiments of the Viet Cong 9th Division, and the 101st North Vietnamese regiment, are now in the ATTLEBORO area. In addition, intelligence reports have revealed that the Viet Cong 70th Security Guard Regiment is in War Zone "C." Its task is to defend COSVN.

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4. Allied forces have already succeeded in inflicting substantial damage to Base Area 55. Vital stores of rice have been seized--over 2,000 tons. This represents enough rice to feed the 9th Viet Cong Division for approximately one year. In addition, large amounts of ammunition, grenades, and weapons have been captured. Moreover, Communist forces defending Base Area 55 have suffered heavy

casualties in the ATTLEBORO fighting. Thus far, nearly 1,000 Communist soldiers are known to have been killed in ATTLEBORO.

Tactical Options Facing the Viet Cong

5. Faced with 19 allied battalions poised in the fringes of War Zone "C," the Communists now must make a critical decision on their next tactical move: whether to stand their ground or to evacuate this critical area.

6. It is possible that they will attempt a stiff defense of the rest of the extensive base complex should allied units move further into War Zone "C." The current deployment of the four main force Communist regiments in the ATTLEBORO area suggests that for the present, at least, they intend to stay close to the allied elements probably in the hope of ambushing small units. This could produce some severe clashes. These four Communist regiments in the battle area have a total estimated strength of about 7,000. COSVN command headquarters has probably estimated that this was a sufficiently large force to protect War Zone "C" both because no major allied effort has been launched against this base area in the past and because the heavy jungle and dense forest give a smaller Communist defensive force an advantage over larger offensive forces.

7. The Communists may also launch attacks in other nearby areas, particularly in regions from which US forces have been taken to furnish troops for ATTLEBORO, in order to divert and offset the thrust into War Zone "C." There have been some small-scale actions by the Communists elsewhere in III Corps which may represent an effort to reduce the pressure on their troops in the ATTLEBORO area. The failure on their part thus far to mount major diversionary attacks may stem from a realization that allied mobility and troop reserves have grown to the point where such attacks would be rendered useless and costly.

8. Instead of attempting a full defense of their bases against the overwhelming allied force, the Communists may choose to move as much of their

key equipment and personnel as possible out of War Zone "C" to other, more secure, areas.

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9. By this tactic, the Communists would hope to avoid a crippling blow from ATTLEBORO. Their practice in the past has been to filter back and rebuild their base area once the allied troops have withdrawn. If they should use this tactic successfully in ATTLEBORO, the long-term impact of the allied operation will be lessened to a considerable extent.

Long Term Implications of ATTLEBORO

10. The longer range significance of ATTLEBORO will depend in large measure on the nature of the allied follow-up to initial successes. Of particular significance would be the successful destruction of the various facilities in the heartland of War Zone "C." Such destruction would carry the inherent implication that allied military strength is now sufficient to deny the Communists the permanent, unhindered use of any base area in South Vietnam. If the Communists cannot successfully defend the COSVN encampment, they have little hope of preventing the allies from overrunning every Communist base area.

11. Regular and persistent ground interdiction of the major Communist base areas would severely hamper the enemy's entire political and military effort in South Vietnam, particularly in the important

area around Saigon. The Communists could attempt to establish an alternate base headquarters across the border in Cambodia, but it is doubtful that they could duplicate the extensive complex of facilities now housed in War Zone "C" without seriously exacerbating relations with Sihanouk and running the risk of a military confrontation with the Cambodians.

12. Over the long term, perhaps the most significant aspect of Operation ATTLEBORO will be the fact that by forcing the Communists to abandon, even temporarily, their headquarters base, the allies have dramatically demonstrated to the Communists the success of the operational concept which has been described as the search-and-destroy/spoiling action. The Communist military leadership can now have little doubt that the allied military strength and mobility in South Vietnam is such that an overwhelming number of troops can quickly be thrown into action in any area without seriously weakening other vital areas. Moreover, even the temporary loss of their political and military headquarters would be a severe psychological and political setback to the Communists, whose aura of invincibility used to be one of their most potent political weapons.

13. It is also possible that Operation ATTLEBORO will write the last chapter to the debate which has been conducted among the Vietnamese Communist military leaders concerning whether to emphasize guerrilla tactics over mobile warfare operations. The series of search-and-destroy/spoiling actions launched by the US over the past year has made it more and more difficult for the Communists to mount their own large-scale offensive operations. The COSVN military staff, however, as late as August 1966 was arguing in the North Vietnamese theoretical journal that it was possible and necessary to continue to mount mobile-type actions. ATTLEBORO, by bringing the war right to COSVN's door, may convince even the most die-hard Communist leaders that they must now put greater emphasis on guerrilla tactics, possibly even at the expense of mounting large-scale operations.

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